

# What to expect at your child's first dental visit

By Amy Gustafson

The American Dental Association recommends kids having their first dental visit by their first birthday. While this may seem early, at least one in four children has a cavity before age four. The goal is to educate parents early about caring for their children's teeth in order to prevent decay before it starts.

If you can get your child in for the first visit before the age of two, here is what to expect:

- A quick 30- to 45-minute exam appointment that is mostly spent talking with dental professionals about any concerns you may have, reviewing cleaning techniques and frequency, and your child's diet and nutrition.
- Parents should be prepared to answer questions about pertinent habits (bottle use, pacifiers, thumb-sucking), the child's medical conditions and feeding practices.
- A short knee-to-knee exam. Parents sit facing the dentist and the child lies on their laps. The dentist will check the general health of your child's teeth, tissue and their overall development.
- Depending on the child's cooperation level, a gentle dental cleaning (it may just be a good brushing) and potential fluoride application.

During appointments with children, it is normal if they cry. Do not worry. To minimize stress on your child, schedule the appointment when they are most awake – not near nap times – and not hungry. If fluoride is applied, the dentist may ask you to avoid giving the child anything to eat or drink for a little while after the appointment.

If you have not gotten your older child into the dentist yet, it is not too late. The dental team will be happy to welcome children at any age. Your older child's first visit will be similar to the toddler's visit, although older children will sit independently on the dental chair.

For children over age two, X-rays may be taken, depending on the child's age, development and cooperation.

Expect a more thorough dental cleaning. The dental hygienist will use various cleaning tools as needed.

It is common for kids of any age to feel nervous before their first exam. Talk openly with your children about what to expect and why regular dental care is important for their health. For younger children, books about dental visits can be found at the library and can be helpful to make the appointment less intimidating.

You and your child should leave the exam with a sense of accomplishment, a recommendation for frequency of future check-ups and cleanings and maybe even a new toothbrush.

*Dr. Amy Gustafson, a dentist at RiverStone Health Dental Clinic, can be reached at 406-247-3333.*